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The Mountain Sublime of Philip James de Loutherbourg and Joseph Mallord William Turner

Aurélie Tremblet

"Great things are done when Men & Mountains
meet;
This is not Done by Jostling in the street."
(William Blake, *circa* 1783).

1 While laying much emphasis on the antinomic character of the mountain and urban environments—the mountain world being associated with salience ("Great" is stressed) whereas the urban world, with its flat streets and anonymous crowds, symbolizes the absence of great deeds ("not done")—William Blake strives to make the reader understand the significance of the meeting between men and summits. Uniting men and mountains with similar sounds, through the alliteration in 'm' notably ("*m*en", "*m* ountains", "*m*eet"), the artist defines their encounter as a fruitful and harmonious union. With this meeting of the two lips which the bilabial sound affords, the Romantic poet thereby unites men and mountains in a soft kiss. To a certain extent, it is a sort of appeal to the summits and love relationship between men and mountains that Blake establishes here.

2 However, does it necessarily mean that, at the end of the 18th, beginning of the 19th century, this harmonious vision of the man-and-summit encounter prevailed? The analysis of the concept of 'salience' which we plan to make here, relies on two oil canvases: one from Philip James de Loutherbourg (*An Avalanche in the Alps*, 1803); the other from Joseph Mallord William Turner (*The Fall of an Avalanche in the Grisons*, 1810). This comparative study will come with an analysis of the discourse on saliency as Turner had joined a poem to his pictorial work of art, dealing with the subject matter we are interested in: the representation of Alpine relief at the beginning of the 19th century. We will thus study the way both artists have looked upon the Alps: as individuals unfamiliar

with mountain relief, did they share Blake's viewpoint? Or, on the contrary, did they merely focus on the inaccessible and dangerous nature of such places?

An Avalanche in the Alps. Philip James de Loutherbourg, 1803

The Fall of an Avalanche in the Grisons. Joseph Mallord William Turner, 1810

3 We will first underline the striking analogies there are between the two canvases, which will help us to distinguish several forms and factors of saliency. This first step in our

analysis will enable us to understand that these common features actually constitute the key ingredients to an aesthetic reflection directly linked to the notion of saliency and which emerged in Great-Britain in the 19th century, eventually spreading through Europe as a whole: the Sublime. P. de Loutherbourg's and W. Turner's representations of saliency thus bear the marks of Edmund Burke's monumental influence. Stressing grandeur and verticality, they nevertheless seem to go hand in hand with a discourse on annihilation, offering a true metaphysical meditation, visually and rhythmically echoed in Turner's verse. It is on that particular point, we believe, that the difference between both artists can be felt most—a difference which has to do with the degrees in saliency reached in their representation; meaning that, with Turner, the meditation on life and death, on man and the transiency of life, goes a step further. Representation gives way to intense experience.

The visual salience of Alpine relief: Turner echoing Loutherbourg

4 *An Avalanche in the Alps* and *The Fall of an Avalanche in the Grisons* bear striking similarities. Besides being both oil on canvases, of comparable dimensions (1099x1600mm et 900x1200mm respectively) and being both exposed at the Tate Gallery in London, they represent, as their title makes it clear, a similar natural disaster—an avalanche-—taking place in the same location—The French and Swiss Alps. Both paintings thus depict the same fateful moment when an avalanche is about to sweep along everything in its path, thereby burying four persons hiking with their dog in Loutherbourg's painting and an Alpine cottage in Turner's.

Intrinsic saliency

5 In their representation of Alpine relief, each canvas relies upon the same main manifestations of saliency. More particularly, three occurrences of this phenomenon strike the spectator immediately, all corresponding to a particular form of saliency, which one could call natural or intrinsic.

6 In accordance with the categories established by Frédéric Landragin in his classification of visual salience criteria (Landragin, 2011), a first form of saliency stands out in the two paintings: one "intrinsic to the nature of the object", linked to the category of the object in question. The scene the spectator is faced with is indeed an Alpine scene, therefore representing a mountain, that is, a relief, an eminence, a significant ground elevation. The notion of saliency is all the more present in those scenes as the painted landscape is a far cry from a low-lying area. The characters in Loutherbourg's canvas do not walk in low or medium mountains, amidst welcoming meadows strewn with colourful wildflowers. There are no such things as soft ground undulations or peaceful lakes with pleasant banks. Whether it be in Loutherbourg's painting or in Turner's, the world which is described is that of high mountains, with their abrupt and inhospitable relief. This jagged stony world, made up of bare rocks, on which nothing seems capable of growing, combines with the relative absence of vegetation, as well as with blocks of snow and ice to convey the ideas of absence of protection, of desolation, not to say sterility, connoting the impossibility for humans to live there. Through both paintings, ascensionists and spectators therefore enter a remote, raw and hostile place. Saliency is above all

synonymous with vertical distance. We find ourselves in a high and remote location, confronted to wild, primal nature, away from civilization, as though we had entered a world that had lost its way and had come back to the origins of things.

7 Besides this first form of salience, linked to the category of the object in question (i.e. a mountain), another form of natural salience, linked this time to two physical features of the mountainous landscape stands out. The first physical characteristic of this high altitude scenery is the enormous stony thrust, a vertical boulder having pride of place at the centre of both canvases and which is about to destroy the only human traces the scenes comprise. Both paintings rely upon this gigantic monolithic spur, whose lofty figure, somewhat reminding us of that of the Pierra Menta, is echoed in the multiplicity of vertical and pointed shapes making up each scene. In addition to the verticality of the rock face, both paintings resort not only to tall slender fir trees and rocks sticking out, but to multiple angular lines and triangular motifs as well. In Loutherbourg's painting for instance, the thrust which the main central spur constitutes is mirrored in the two main triangles the painting is made up of, divided as it is by a clear-cut diagonal line going from the top left-hand corner to the opposite right-hand corner of the image, and within which other triangles appear again. Whether it be with Loutherbourg or with Turner, the spectator is therefore invited to enter a similar world; not one of low or medium mountains, with their reassuring round and smooth lines, but that of high mountains indeed, characterized by high and sharp shapes, spikes and verticality. A summital world which is epitomized and reproduced in Loutherbourg's painting by the omnipresent geometrical figure of the triangle.

8 The intrinsic saliency present in both representations originates in both artists aptly emphasizing a second physical quality of the Alpine landscape. Another criterion of intrinsic saliency thus emerges, which has nothing to do with the shape of the object this time, but with its colours—the saliency of mountains in the winter due to their inherent whiteness and luminosity. The brightness of the snow fall is particularly striking in both paintings indeed. Present in all its different hues, including its most dazzling tints, it makes up more than half of each canvas. We cannot help but notice, however, that the presence of this "intrinsically salient element", to take up Frédéric Landragin's terms once more, is also studied and emphasized. It is the result of the co-presence of a much darker range of colours. The two paintings thus take advantage of a brilliantly orchestrated chromatic contrast between a brownish foreground, suggesting earth, and a second plane made up of much clearer, dazzling not to say diaphanous tints, evocative of ethereal regions. In Loutherbourg's painting, this chromatic contrast is all the more striking as a clear-cut diagonal line splits the image in two, creating a cleavage between the left plane, characterized by brownish tints and the right one, composed of much clearer tints. The opposition is made all the more radical and striking as there are no intermediary colours between the two planes, thereby creating a *chiaroscuro* effect. Although we are undeniably faced with two representations of natural salience, in all their verticality and luminosity—two striking physical and perceptive properties of saliency—we however embrace part of Albert Hamm's definition, to be found in his article untitled "Towards a Recognition of the Concept of Salience", according to which the concept hinges upon an "opposition in context" (64): "It is probably in the domain of visual perception that the concept of salience has probably been most frequently resorted to in order to describe how, while visually apprehending a scene, an element (or several

ones) sometimes emerges *in contrast to its environment*." (53, the translation and emphasis are ours).

Enhancing salience: for an emotional response to the Sublime

9 The representation of an intrinsic form of salience obviously combines with a constructed one—the result of an artistic reflexion. These deliberate accentuations of saliency, whose aim is also linked to that notion, fall into two categories.

Salience and assailants: operating "in context"

10 The first form of emphasis the artists use is contextual. In other words, there are times when the object in question becomes salient "in context", that is "compared to the other objects present in the scene" (Landragin, 2011, p. 77). A key factor of saliency which is subjected to such contrastive opposition is that of the scale of compositions. The gigantic size of the main boulder, its considerable height and width, can only be fully grasped because it offers a stark contrast with the comparatively ridiculous size of the people or the cottage beside it. Compared to the size of the avalanche and to the dimensions of the surrounding rocks, the characters seem dwarfed, represented in a dwindled manner. They are just tiny figures recoiling from the power of nature and their impending doom. In this connection, the behaviour of the characters closest to the avalanche in the 1803 painting speaks volumes. They are either trying to flee or are raising their hands towards the heavens with their fists clutched, whether out of sheer powerlessness or by way of making a last pleading prayer, showing how stunned or terrified they are. This striking dichotomy between human smallness on the one hand and natural grandeur on the other hand, vulnerability and power, is dramatized in Loutherbourg's painting. In the lower right section of the image a small wooden bridge indeed stands out—a frail human construction the avalanche has just destroyed, burying at the same time a man whose arm (tragically raised towards the sky) is the only body part protruding from the white chaos. The scale of human effort is totally dwarfed by the power of nature. Although putting aside the theatricality of his model's scene, Turner seems to have taken up the same idea when he painted his cottage, a man-made construction once more, emphasizing that man's toil amounts to nothing compared to the mightiness of nature. Man will not be granted any comfort or protection in this inhospitable environment. Laying much stress on the grandeur and power of such a hostile and raging world, the two painters therefore agree in defining man's meeting with the summits as a terrifying encounter. The near dual of swords involving the frail pointed fir tree and the massive boulder, both present at the center of Loutherbourg's painting, epitomizes the ideas of danger and cleavage, emphasizing the existence of a profound duality between vulnerability and power, at the core of both representations.

Undermining conventions

11 In addition to this first form of deliberate saliency, operating "in context", there comes to the fore another one, hinging upon "unusual uses" of the object, to take up a category established by Albert Hamm (Hamm, 2011, p. 64). To put it differently, with Loutherbourg and Turner, mountains and avalanches are all the more salient as they break an implicit rule. To be more precise, this saliency-conveying disruption involves the conventional

reading direction of an image. The latter traditionally operates from left to right—a code Loutherbourg's canvas both recalls and reinforces thanks to the three characters' walking direction, progressing from the left side towards the right side of the image. And yet, in the representations we are interested in, the avalanche comes from the right half of the painting. It thus clearly blocks not only the characters' way but any possibility of escape. As Hamm reminds us, dealing with a different image (54), if the scene had been reversed, the avalanche then coming from the left, and because of the reading direction from left to right, the image would have been perceived as a more "open" pursuit, whose outcome might have proved more positive for the characters. Whereas in our examples, the scenes turn out to be more frightening. The image can only be interpreted as an "impeded" movement and the only option available for the characters seems a fatal one.

Linguistic saliency

12 The manifestations of saliency we have highlighted in the visual field so far seem to have equivalents in the linguistic field. Notice, as it is relatively uncommon in aesthetics, that Turner had annexed an eight-line poem to his pictorial work of art, whose workings prove particularly interesting for our analysis. First of all, because the primary role of the octet is to amplify the content of the painted landscape, so the poem serves a saliency function. Second, because Turner produces effects in it that are comparable to those of his painting, that can not only be interpreted in terms of saliency but disclose a particular aesthetic vision of it as well.

The disruption of the avalanche: syntactic saliency

13 The blank verse poem Turner annexed to *The fall of an avalanche in the Grisons* is the following one:

> The downward sun a parting sadness gleams,
> Portenteous lurid thro' the gathering storm;
> Thick drifting snow on snow,
> Till the vast weight bursts thro' the rocky barrier;
> Down at once, its pine clad forests,
> And towering glaciers fall, the work of ages
> Crashing through all! Extinction follows,
> And the toil, the hope of man – o'erwhelms.

14 The reason why the reader's attention is drawn to the opening line as well as to the final one is two-fold. It is not only because their position is intrinsically salient - at the onset of the poem and concluding it - but because they're subjected to the same syntactic disruption. In both lines, the canonical word order is dynamited, the objects being moved to a preverbal position, sending off the verbs ("gleams" and "o'erwhelms") to the end of each line. Obviously throwing light on verbs of action, these verb-object inversions underline the energy of the avalanche dynamics, capable of disrupting everything.

The explosive energy of the avalanche: rhythmic and phonic saliency

15 Besides this first form of saliency, originating in a relatively unusual use of the English language, based on disruption, a second one comes to the fore, this time working in

opposition to the rhythm of the other lines. Line six indeed stands out from the rhythmic pattern created by the surrounding end-stopped lines. All of them create regular breathing pauses coinciding with the end of the lines; a comma or a semi-colon marking the end of each poetic unit. This syntactic and typographic coincidence, reproducing a well-defined and stable world also evoked by the regularity of the initial iambic pentameter, is broken by the run-on-line. Line six overflows, thus running on into part of the seventh line, like an unstoppable avalanche crashing through all the walls and constructions standing in its way. It is once more the energy of such an indomitable nature which the run-on-line conveys here—an explosive energy which can be felt in the dynamism of the exclamation mark as well as in the thunderous cracking sound afforded by the hiatus "through all". This vowel clash, which puts an end to the run-on-line on line seven, is all the more perceptible as it is both in central position, at the end of the first hemistich, and underlined by the only internal rhyme in the poem—an eminently programmatic one—"fall / all". The run-on-line, hiatus and strong punctuation marks therefore work together, creating rhythmic and phonic saliency, so as to conjure up the thundering power of the avalanche.

Crushing: visual saliency

16 Turner's reflection on mountain relief shows one more peculiarity. Whether it be in his painting or in his verse, the representation of high relief goes hand in hand with that of its opposite, man's littleness. In other words, in his pictorial and poetic representations Turner is not interested in verticality alone, as was on the contrary the case with his 1804 watercolour *The Passage of the St. Gothard*. First and foremost, saliency is considered in its crushing potential. In the poem for instance, much emphasis is laid on the descending movement of the avalanche, as the isotopy of the fall makes it clear ("downward", "drifting", "down", "fall", "crashing"). However, the most significant element, which visually strikes the reader even when going through the poem for the first time, is the presence of such a punctuation mark as the dash in the final line "And the toil, the hope of man – o'erwhelms." Interestingly enough, Turner therefore associates a horizontal line to his representation of Alpine relief. The materiality of this sign is pregnant with meaning: a horizontal and straight mark, the dash connotes crushing while it simultaneously constitutes a pause, triggering off a strong break in the structure of the sentence. Placed as it is, right after man's toil and hope have been mentioned, it becomes synonymous with annihilation—a reminder of human finitude, of the avalanche's ability not only to dash hopes but to dash men into pieces. As a consequence, we follow Frédéric Landragin according to whom visual and linguistic saliency are two sides of the same coin. Just like Loutherbourg's and Turner's paintings, the poem is a representation of saliency hinging upon the same two mechanisms, which involve either opposition or unconventionality. The goal of such representations isn't so much to throw light upon man's attempts to conquer nature. Much rather, they aim at emphasizing the wild and terrifying character of such a potentially destructive natural world. Here lies the peculiarity of Loutherbourg and Turner's reflection on saliency: their discourse on relief goes hand in hand with a simultaneous discourse on annihilation.

Mirroring the divine

Nature and Supernature

17 Moreover, both artists draw upon the symbolism of altitude in their paintings, viewing it as affording access to higher realms, that is, access to the divine. With Loutherbourg and Turner, mountains become places where the presence of the divine can be felt. A second tension thus emerges in the paintings, that between nature and supernature. What strikes us most when looking at the top of both images and therefore at the sky is how infinitely withdrawn it seems: the further the eyes go, the hazier it becomes. The place of the Holy is veiled to the eyes. Although it cannot be named, it is a power which is nevertheless present. In Loutherbourg's representation numerous elements point to the beyond. The central thrust, which rapidly calls the viewer's attention, protrudes from the clear-cut diagonal line for instance—a striking transgression which directs our eyes upwards, towards the heavens, the beyond, the haze. From a structural viewpoint, the Ideal and the invisible are highlighted as well in Turner's representation, as the sky makes up over half of the picture. One further remark could be made regarding composition and the use of pointed motifs to draw the spectator's attention to the sky and the divine. If one pays attention to the 1803 painting and to one of its main two triangles—the one to the right, whose sides correspond to the frame of the painting and to the diagonal—one will notice that it is no coincidence if the path the characters are treading joins the diagonal in the middle. Indeed, the whole visually forms an arrow, inviting us to look upwards—in a way not too dissimilar from the characters'—beyond the avalanche and the sky, outside the frame. Once more, it is the invisible which, although it cannot be represented, is being suggested here—the invisible infinity of divine power as well as the unrepresentable nature of death. For we are indeed at a critical moment: the travellers are about to be crushed. The omnipresence of white, which is both the sum of all colours—thereby representing the infinity of the divine— and the standard colour of shrouds—calling human finitude to mind—is thus subservient to a metaphysical meditation on life and death, on divine power and on the impossibility to represent the passage that is death.

Terror and awe: the production and reception conditions of a given image

18 As they are hostile, potentially destructive places yet also providing an access to the divine in all its purity and mightiness, summits engender opposite but always grandiose feelings. Saliency is thus considered in the feelings of terror and awe it arouses. These antithetical responses cannot go unnoticed in Loutherbourg's painting. If the three characters closest to the avalanche—two on the left side, one on the right side of the image—look absolutely terrified, the fourth one, farther from it, on the contrary seems in awe. The reflection on saliency which Loutherbourg and Turner serve at the beginning of the 19th century therefore seem to revolve around the notion of the Sublime, which arose with Edmund Burke's aesthetic treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, published in 1757. The manifestations of saliency highlighted above, which find expression in vertical distance, remoteness from civilization, the infinity of an indomitable natural world and sharp pointed shapes, completely

correspond to the features of the Sublime, a notion which draws the line between the beautiful (resulting from a mere pleasure, whose qualities are smoothness, softness and roundness) and the sublime (resulting from an overwhelming experience, and whose qualities are this time roughness, sharpness, saliency). All the ingredients of the Sublime are indeed gathered in the paintings, including the need for strong emotional responses. Edmund Burke indeed defines terror as a ruling principle of his theory of art: "Whatever is in any sort terrible, or conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the Sublime" (Burke, 1792, p. 47). Direct proximity arouses terror, which can only be turned into awe by introducing distance between the viewer and the scene. This reflection on distance and presence is at the heart of the Sublime—as it is, somehow, for saliency, feeding on the presence of its opposite, human smallness—; when facing nature's spectacle, a certain distance is necessary in order to experience an aesthetic feeling. As Loutherbourg and Turner see it, the spectator's emotional response is thus part and parcel of the notion of saliency.

19 The focus on emotional responses works as a reminder of the significance of the production and reception conditions of an image. As saliency deeply depends upon the subject receiving the message, according to both painters, we have got to take into account who their audience was. Let's not forget that at the time when the canvasses were painted and exhibited, 'Grand Tours' were certainly on the rise—since the middle of the 18th century, more and more young British and German aristocrats had been taking this trip throughout Europe, crossing the Alps to reach Italy and Florence notably; people were certainly becoming more and more interested in foreign cultures, mores and environments—but the exploration of Alpine summits remained exceptional. Far from being 'alpinists', the most reckless ones were 'ascensionists' at best, or, more commonly, 'travellers', like those undertaking the traditional 'journey to the Glaciers' of Chamonix, France. Even though Loutherbourg and Turner happened to live at a time of transition as regards the way men considered mountains, some of them starting to dare venture deep into unknown valleys, looking up towards the summits with eyes filled with astonishment and wonder, they nevertheless were artists coming from flat countries, completely unfamiliar with mountain relief. During the journey Turner made to Switzerland back in 1802, the latter did not travel as far east as the Grisons. He was inspired for his painting by an article that reported an avalanche had occurred in December 1808 at Selva in the Grisons, sweeping with it no less than 25 persons gathered in one cottage alone (Shanes, 2008, p. 110). This cultural factor of saliency therefore shouldn't be downplayed, as it meant increased salience for the artists' contemporaries who had come to admire the paintings and can nowadays account for one of the main manifestations of saliency in the 19th century, i.e. the strong and painful feelings it could arouse.

Turner or the vivid experience of the Sublime

A metapictorial reflection

20 How can one involve the audience? This is the question triggered off in the two paintings, as both artists believe viewers are instrumental in the definitions of saliency and the Sublime. Loutherbourg chooses to involve the spectator through the three main characters of his painting. The latter are spectators, just like us. Because of our shared status and their standing in the centre of the image, we therefore enter the scene through them. Yet, the latter also function as a sort of threshold, inserting some distance, like a

protective barrier, between us and the scene proper. With Turner, the experience is completely different: gone is the threshold; the viewer is, on the contrary, thrown into the scene, directly confronted with the avalanche. This impression is due to the foreground, whose size is really unusual. It is indeed reduced to its bare minimum, almost non-existent compared to the size granted to the skies. In other words, the observer is no longer a protected spectator; the painting encourages us to become active participants, to go through strong and personal emotions. With Turner, the representation of saliency turns into intense experience. We believe this is the "*punctum*" of the canvas, that unsettling detail which both attracts and wounds us, to take up a Barthesian notion (Barthes, 1980, p.48-9) which is very much in keeping with the concept of saliency as it means "a sting". We did not expect the avalanche theme to be treated in such a way in Turner's painting, immersing us in the scene, requiring our direct involvement. To put it differently, the smallness of the foreground stings us; it pierces us. It could even be argued—provided spectators viewing Turner's later canvas also had in mind his contemporary's—that the experience of the grandeur of nature informing Turner's painting gains in intensity *in opposition to* Loutherbourg's representation.

Turner and movement-related saliency

21 Besides analogies, significant differences emerge between Loutherbourg and Turner. The most striking difference in regards to saliency lies in the attention paid to the energy and the dynamics of the avalanche. In that sense the title of the 1810 painting speaks volumes: it is not *An Avalanche* but *The Fall* of an avalanche. Turner thus stresses the complete omnipotence of nature by focusing on the movement of elements. The gigantic rocky spur falling over the cottage combines with an enormous rock suspended in mid-air as well as with dark threatening storm clouds—evocative of *Snowstorm: Hannibal Crossing the Alps* (Turner, 1812)—that form a sharply opposing diagonal to the plummeting mass of snow, so as to reinforce the powerfulness of the swirl of snow. Testifying to the evocative force of such elements in movement, Ruskin declared in 1856, in his *Notes on the Turner Gallery at Marlborough House*: "No one ever before had conceived a stone in *flight*." (Ruskin, 2013, p.50). The viewer cannot be distracted from that powerful semi-circular movement as the bystanders have disappeared and man is symbolized by the mountain hut, that is, man is represented as a landscape, has become one with the landscape. The painting is thus a perfect example of the phenomenon discussed by Burke. When the spectator is faced with a Sublime landscape: "the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other" (Burke, 1792, p.79). We cannot escape the vortex of the snow slide.

22 Turner also manages to throw into sharp relief the energy and violence of the natural disaster because he exploits the materiality of paint. *The Fall of an Avalanche in the Grisons* indeed relies upon a peculiar painting technique. The oil on canvas was partly painted with a palette knife, with a vigour and a roughness appropriate to the subject. Sometimes fleeting, sometimes marked (as in the blocks of snow sharply contrasting from the storm), the strokes convey the speed and violence of such an overwhelming elemental force. Above all, the use of oil painting combined with that of the palette knife enables the artist to form beautiful impasto accents, thereby obtaining particularly visible and evocative relief effects. The vigour and energy of the brushstrokes, coupled with the relief formed by the coats of paint, epitomize the energy of the packed layers of snow tumbling down the mountain.

23 In short, the striking analogies there are between these two representations of Alpine relief—the similarities being thematic, chromatic as well as structural—testify to the strong influence Loutherbourg exerted on Turner. Whether it be pictorial or poetical, the artists offer a similar reflection on saliency, associating it with a discourse on both vertical energy and annihilation. At the same time, they testify to the similarity of the mechanisms underpinning visual and linguistic saliency. It is in contrastive juxtaposition and in breaking reading codes and expectations, that Alpine relief finds most of its essence and evocative force. These salience-enhancement strategies are subservient to an intense emotional experience—the response to the Sublime—as well as to a metapictorial and metaphysical meditation on the role and place of spectators and men within the universe. For those two artists sharing a preoccupation with dramatic Alpine scenes and men's response to them, grandeur and vulnerability, infinity and finitude, repulsion and attraction become indissociable. Yet substantial differences emerge between their masterpieces as Turner strove to emphasize the energy of avalanches. Saliency thus takes on a more personal note: it is that of Turner, eager to confront his seemingly inaccessible model, a past master at landscape painting. Turner echoing Loutherbourg is Turner comparing himself to his contemporary so as to surpass him and assert his superiority. As Jacques Mayoux reminds us in *La peinture anglaise: de Hoggarth aux Préraphaélites* : " *Avalanche in the Grisons* is Turner measuring himself against Loutherbourg" (Mayoux, 1988, p. 201), hereby once more confirming, if need be, the essentially contrastive nature of saliency. One further question arises about the reception of the canvasses in the 19th century and in the modern era. Since access to mountains has been democratized, have Loutherbourg's and Turner's representations of mountain relief become flat and dull? We believe the quest for summits in the 19th century finds a significant echo in the modern world. Hikers, alpinists and trail runners alike all testify to the need to go out of their comfort zone, to embrace new and strong perceptions and emotions, feel the raw boundless energy of nature, and experience the incredible sense of freedom it affords, away from human turpitudes. The discovery of mountain relief has simply turned into the need for it, its deep-seated reasons are unchanged, still spiritual and ontological: to understand where our place is in the universe and, simply, who we are.

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Iconography

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ABSTRACTS

Our analysis of the concept of saliency relies on two iconographic representations of Alpine relief. One is from Philip James de Loutherbourg (An Avalanche in the Alps, 1803); the other from Joseph Mallord William Turner (The Fall of an Avalanche in the Grisons, 1810). This comparative study comes with an analysis of the discourse on saliency as Turner had joined a poem to his pictorial work of art. We will thus study the way both artists have looked upon the Alps: as individuals unfamiliar with mountain relief, and depicting a similar natural disaster —an avalanche—, did they merely focus on the inaccessible and dangerous nature of such places?
If there are striking analogies between the two canvases, disclosing the existence of several forms and factors of saliency, common to both artists —and directly echoing the aesthetic notion of the Sublime, which emerged in Great-Britain in the 19th century— these visual manifestations of saliency seem to have equivalents in the linguistic field. We thus follow Frédéric Landragin when trying to demonstrate that the poem as well as the paintings by De Loutherbourg and Turner hinge upon the same two main mechanisms, based on disruption.

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